



Teaching Religion and Material Culture

By: **Richard Carp**

Abstract

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Teaching Religion and Material Culture

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ABSTRACT

Because religions discipline and interpret bodies; create and define sacred spaces; generate, adore and study images in all media; regulate the intake of food; structure temporal experience; and in general interpenetrate and are permeated by the cultural landscapes in which they exist, religious studies must engage material religion and religious materiality. We encounter bodily realities of other religions and cultures through our own disciplined bodies, which are both necessary and problematic for those encounters. This article connects theoretical and practical resources needed to help students discover the stuff of religion – flesh and blood, bread and wine, songs and sound, knives and body parts, movement and music, human bodies, time, space, cosmograms composed of and composing the bodies of the religious – uncovering the materiality of religion, existing underneath, alongside, without, and amidst religious textuality and verbal ideation.

ARTICLE

Preface

The boy child, days out of the womb, is laid, naked, on the table. His family gather around him as the ritual specialist removes his tools from the sacred bundle where he stores them. An ancient chant fills the air. Swiftly the amputation takes place; the boy wails in painful protest; the wound is cleansed and bound; the body part, now separate

from the body to which it belonged, is discarded. The circumcision is complete, the ancient covenant with YHVH fulfilled.

At the beginning of each day, the housewife in South India takes colored chalk. With her daughters, she traces a set of geometric patterns forming a ritual drawing at the doorstep of her house. The ranguli will protect her household throughout the day.

The god-man's symbolic body is displayed on the table. The priest dismembers it into bite-sized pieces; the blood is collected in a ceremonial vessel. The worshipers gather in a circle around the drained and broken god. Each in turn eats the flesh and drinks the blood while the ritual master repeats a simple chant over and over. Eucharist has been performed.

Five times each day ordinary time is rent by the infusion of sacred time. Adherents cease their profane activities and prepare to pray. Ordinary space, too, is transformed, as all believers everywhere turn to face the most holy place, the center. In the sacred time, in the sacred place, the body too transforms: all kneel and prostrate themselves. Five times each day the ordinary is perfused with the sacred. If one could see this act from space, the adherents would make concentric circles around the holy point, each body resembling as closely as possible each other body: facing, kneeling, prostrating, praying together, at the same time. Salat occurs, and with it Muslims form a cosmogram of their unity and of Allah as both union and center.

A woman dances in a group of men and women. Drummers, seated outside the dancing group, beat complex polyrhythms. After she has danced for quite some time, one of the drummers suddenly switches the rhythm of his beat, and her body transforms, as the sacred being whose horse she is begins to ride her once again. Some of the other dancers and most of the crowd assembled but not dancing, servants of the spirit in what we call Voudon, notice that a visit from the divine has begun.

In these examples we begin to discover the stuff of religion: flesh and blood, bread and wine, songs and sound, knives and body parts, movement and music, human bodies, time, space, and cosmograms composed of and composing the bodies of the religious.

We uncover the materiality of religion, existing underneath, alongside, without, and amidst religious textuality and verbal ideation.

Introduction

Religions discipline and interpret bodies; create and define sacred spaces through architecture; generate, adore, and study images in all media; regulate the intake of food; structure temporal experience; and in general interpenetrate and are in turn permeated by the cultural landscapes in which they exist. Religion is fundamentally material, bodily, and physical. Although scholars often approach material religion as if it illustrates religious texts, the opposite is often true. Religious texts frequently articulate or attempt to make verbal sense out of what is first both experienced and expressed physically. The narrative of the passion of Jesus, for example, initially took shape in the context of early Christian ritual, where it found its meaning as part of a ceremonial whole, in relation to bread and wine, flesh and blood, bodies together in space and time engaged in ritual action. Paul's theologizing and Mark's gospelling took root in relation to this material environment.

To understand religion, we must conceive it in the context of material culture. To teach religion from the standpoint of material culture, we must take religious materiality seriously as a rudimentary phenomenon. Doing so reveals the materiality of all knowing and believing and discloses the materiality of the academy. Scholars' bodies (ours and our students') are thrown into relief as media and tools of our inquiry. Academic material culture moves to the center of questions about how the field of religion is constituted; we find we need a hermeneutics of material culture and the body.

When we study religion through material culture in the classroom, students engage the material conditions within which they actually conduct their studies and the bodily disciplines those material conditions require, reward, induce, or discourage at the same time as they encounter material religion. Working with material culture also counters the notion that religion is primarily a matter of text and belief. Moreover, material culture opens religious contexts we could not otherwise approach. While material culture is used and made in all components of society (including women, the poor, the illiterate, the unorthodox, and the heretical) and in cultures without writing, written texts are limited to literate societies and have tended to belong to small elites composed mostly of economically and politically powerful men (Miles 1985).

Encountering and accounting for the dense materiality of religion pose significant challenges to the academic study of religion from introductory undergraduate classes, to graduate education, to professional research and theory. As we will see below, there are two primary aspects of this challenge: first, the trenchant but nearly invisible materiality of the academy; second, the role of material culture in forming experience.

Like most humanists and social scientists, scholars in religious studies tend not to be well educated in material culture. We may, therefore, be reluctant to introduce it to our students. Yet doing so can help reorient other levels of our work in significant and fruitful ways, for to do justice to the materiality of religion, we will need to regenerate the field at all stages, beginning with introductory courses and continuing through tenure and promotion – a regeneration that is, to be sure, already underway in some arenas.

The last half of this article addresses using material religion in undergraduate classes. Intended to help open a space of material and pedagogical creativity in which scholar/teachers of religion can innovate, it is meant more to spark readers' imaginations than to provide ready-made assignments. Materiality is ubiquitous in religion and in our classrooms. Once our scholarly and pedagogical imaginations engage materiality, both the need and the opportunity to enhance teaching and learning through material culture become clear. Below I will discuss some of the theoretical, methodological, and pragmatic considerations to keep in mind (see also Cort 1996).

Reawakening the Scholar's Body

Lawrence Sullivan's "Body Works: Knowledge of the Body in the Study of Religion" (1990) provides a helpful introduction to the problematic of the body in relation to the study of the religions. He first asks what the body knows and how we should value body knowledge. Cultural others, says Sullivan, have served "as data to be explained, rather than as theoretical resources for the sciences that study them" (87). The Academy has been interested primarily in learning about, rather than learning from, others.

Yet other cultural traditions and their members have their own "elaborate anthropologies, including subtle construals of the body and its processes of knowing" (Sullivan 1990, 87). Moreover, these anthropologies are, from time to time, universal in

their scope, addressing the human per se. “Just as Greek philosophers did in their day and French deconstructionists did in the 1970's, so the members of these societies wish to offer comment and reflection upon the human condition in our day” (1990, 87). Often they do so “in a bodily experience – rather than through the transmission of narrative doctrine or discourse. In other words, the knowledge of the body that we wish to study and understand is itself often transmitted through culturally shaped experiences of the body” (1990, 87). The religion we wish to study and understand is itself often transmitted through religiously shaped experiences of the body.

Humans share a species-specific body template. That template, however, is fluid and developmental. Taking advantage of its fluidity and working in tandem with its phases of development, cultures shape human bodies, forming them into elements of material culture, which belong to the cultural landscapes within which they take shape. These culturally differing bodies look and feel different from one another, and they are endowed with differing learned skills, including the skills of perception, which affect every level of experience and capacity. Differing culturally shaped bodies experience “body” differently and with these differing bodies experience “the” world differently, as well (Carp 1997).

As Sullivan notes, this is not a fact from which one can remain detached, for it impinges on our own self-understanding, as well as the status of our systems of knowledge (Sullivan 1990, 88). The issue is not how Western disciplines can understand body knowledge, but the effects of body knowledge in those disciplines.

As both Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu have urged, attention to discipline is not merely a concern about institutions and professionalization; it is above all concern about bodies – human bodies. Disciplines are institutionalized formations for organizing schemes of perception, appreciation, and action, and for inculcating them as tools of cognition and communication. (Lenoir 1993, 72)

The study of texts has led to the conclusion that the tools by which we study them and the understanding of textuality we bring to them participate powerfully in the meanings we take from them. Just so, our embodied disciplinary practices and the material culture within and by means of which we undertake them are epistemological problems in the study of religion.

Since [Sullivan says] the body is so often demonstrated to be a primary instrument of knowledge, and since the understanding of the body can vary markedly from one culture and epoch to another, we may have to add to our customary list of hermeneutical reflections yet another question: What kind of challenge is our own bodily existence . . . ? (Sullivan 1990, 99)

The Academy participates in a gnosticizing tradition that tends either to devalue the material or to turn material meanings into disembodied essences. Students (and teachers) encounter the bodily realities of other religions and cultures through our own disciplined bodies, which are both resources for and problems to those encounters, since our sense experience is formed through deeply embedded cultural learning. Consequently, our “actual experiences” of material realities from other commensalities are suspect and need to be questioned. Moreover, we select our experiences according to our own criteria of importance and bring them into the specialized space of the Academy to be integrated with and both clarified and distorted by pre-existing methods and discourses.

The first step is for teachers and students to become aware of our bodies in teaching, learning, and research. Paul Stoller remarks that, “sensory awakening is a very tall order in an academy where mind has long been separated from body, sense long severed from sensibility” (Stoller 1997, xiii). Yet, as he notes, “discussions of the sensuous body require sensuous scholarship in which [scholars] tack between the analytical and the sensible, in which embodied form as well as disembodied logic constitute scholarly argument. Sensuous Scholarship is an attempt to reawaken profoundly the scholar's body by demonstrating how the fusion of the intelligible and the sensible can be applied to scholarly practices and representations” (Stoller 1997, xv). The scholars' bodies needing to awake are our students' and our own.

Material Culture and Sensory Experience

Added to the question of the body is that of perception, which varies from culture to culture and within an individual culture from social location to social location and from time to time; as the senses vary, so does the seemingly immediate experiential world they present and the store of knowledge built up about that world (Carp 1997; Howes 1991, 2005).

Human perceiving is a complex, skilled act. Though rooted in inherent capacities, these capacities are, as Tim Ingold points out, “cultivated, like any skill, through practice and training in an environment” (Ingold 2000, 283). These skills are learned through “systems of apprenticeship” (*italics his*) in which less experienced practitioners (infants and children) learn from more experienced practitioners (older children and adults) (Ingold 2000, 37). As a result, people from different backgrounds do not interpret the same sensory information differently. Rather, “due to their previous bodily training, their senses are differentially attuned to the environment” (Ingold 2000, 162). Human landscapes are largely cultural landscapes, though they are embedded in ecologies; human skills are largely determined by culture, though the range of cultural possibilities is limited by ecological necessities. Experienced practitioners are almost exclusively human and therefore cultured. So bodily training is largely cultural training, and differential perception largely reflects cultural difference.

Infants are radically open to the world; part of enculturation is a process of closure, by means of which some capacities are enhanced while others atrophy. Once atrophied those capacities often cannot be fully developed; sometimes they cannot be developed at all. For example, in the lalling and babbling stage, infants make and play with all the noises humans can make. Once they begin to learn and then use language, they preferentially practice the meaningful phonemes of the language(s) they are learning. Later they may be unable to form sounds that are phonemic in other languages. Few if any native English speakers can form the phonemes of African click languages, though we all did when we lalled and babbled.

Perceptual differences and the cognitive differences that accompany them are distributed in greater and lesser degree. Individuals within a common culture differ, of course, and as we will see below class, gender, and other factors of social location correlate with significant differences. Even within the EuroAmerican ecumene there are noticeable distinctions (Hall 1990, 1981).

Bodies, cultures, sensing and perceiving, and knowing and believing are woven together in a net of interconnections, which cannot be cut. This has implications for religious studies scholars and our students, both insofar as we are knowers and as we conceive our field of study. As knowers we find ourselves ineluctably situated in a network that both enables and limits our knowledge. In conceiving our field of study, we understand humans in general as similarly and differentially situated. To paraphrase Ingold, religious people do not interpret the same world differently; because they

participate in networks of bodies, cultures, sensing and perceiving, and knowing and believing, they experience different worlds, which they interpret. Here, for example, is a Tzotzil version of Christ's crucifixion, from the Chiapas highlands of Mexico:

A long time ago, the Jews decided they were going to kill "Our Father" (the Sun). They caught him in a tree and tried to hang him, but he would not die. He went to die in a sweat-bath house . . . They decided to try to burn him, again without success, for he came out of the fire younger than he was before. They decided that it would rejuvenate them also, so all the Jews jumped into the fire and died . . . this is why they always burn the Judas on Holy Saturday. (Classen 1993, 126)

Such an understanding emphasizes the significance of perceptual difference in religious understanding. Among the Tzotzil heat is the key to perception and understanding; their description of the crucifixion is cast in such terms – the Sun, fire, and burning (Classen 1993, 126). This description certainly varies dramatically from those common within the EuroAmerican ecumene, where sight predominates. Shall we say the Tzotzil description is simply mistaken? That it is a variant? Is this syncretism (and if so what does that term really mean)? Or is "Christianity" among these Tzotzil a different religion from the Christianity usually taught in American college classrooms? Or are these differences somehow fundamentally irrelevant; is this still "Christianity as we know it?" Or is this just an example of common folk misunderstandings of true religion?

Of course, no one could pose answers to these questions based on a single datum, but the conundrums it suggests help articulate one important factor about differential sensoria: within cultural trajectories, one sense may tend to predominate, especially in terms of articulate knowledge, and even more in terms of formal knowledge such as that found in the Academy. In contemporary EuroAmerica, and especially among academics, sight tends to be the most important sense, in perception and in our metaphors for knowledge; we stand, after all, in relation to a tradition that called itself the Enlightenment. Among the Temiar of the Malaysian rainforest, sound and kinesthesia take the lead (Howes 2005, 164–178). Among the Bovasi of West Africa, consciousness is kinesthetic, a feeling in the body rather than light in the mind (Howes 2005, 167–178). Andaman islanders follow their sense of smell, literally sniffing out the truth (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1994, 97).

Sense experience varies within a cultural trajectory over time, as well. People in the dominant trajectories of Medieval Europe did not simply understand the world differently

than we do. They experienced it differently because they perceived it differently, with differently trained and skilled bodies. Of course this applies with equal or greater force to early Christians, or tenth century BCE Hebrews.

Cultural transformations of sensory experience affect the production of material culture, even as they are affected by it. This is true of domestication as well as production *per se*. For example, as Europe became more oriented to sight, domestic roses changed from olfactory to visual delights, to the extent that many contemporary roses have little, if any, odor (Classen 1993, 15–36).

Within a culture, perception may vary according to social location; in some cultures distinguishing, for example, men from women (Classen 1998) and children from adults (Howes 1991, 271). Even when the same sense predominates, it may do so in a different manner, interacting with the other senses and with the world in distinctive fashion. Thus the visuality of the Desana differs from ours (Classen 1993, 53), and both are distinct from that of the Chewong (Howes 1991, 174–175).

These habits of perception, rooted in skills of sensing, permeate the whole body. Except in extreme experimental situations, there are no single senses. Hearing a sound, for example, I may cock my head to hear better, engaging kinaesthesia; then I may turn my head toward the sound, balancing the sound coming to both ears and also turning my eyes toward its source. These actions affect my balance, engaging touch and proprioception, altering the pressure on whatever part of me my body rests upon (usually feet or buttocks, sometimes back, front, side). “Looking, listening, and touching, therefore, are not separate activities, they are just different facets of the same activity . . .” (Ingold 2000, 261).

Our whole bodies, our whole beings, are engaged with the world, and body and world are mutually implicated. The sensorium is complex, interconnected, and malleable. The senses interpenetrate and transform one another, so that what we see and how we see it is affected by what we hear and feel and touch and taste, as well as how we do so. This is so not only in any given moment of experience but also in habits of perception, affecting the totality of the world as experienced and conceived (Howes 1991; Tuan 1993). The habitual and customary interaction of the senses common to a culture, or to a social location within a culture, affects the totality of the perceptual world and, ipso

facto, of the conceptual world, as well, as Nisbett (2003) has demonstrated with respect to contemporary Asian and EuroAmerican cultures.

Scholars' senses and bodies are the context of possibility that give us entrée to the bodies and senses of others, and they also create fundamental limits to that access. C. Nadia Seremetakis, echoing Sullivan, asks: "if modern-western embodiment has been desensitized, in what form can perceiving subjects from that context perceive the senses of the cultural other? Will that particular act of perception merely replicate the very violence against the senses that the western commentator seeks to escape from, to rectify and compensate?" (Seremetakis 1994, 125).

Scholars' bodies are inevitable and inescapable tools of our profession. With them we discover data (research), interpret data (hermeneutics), and organize schemas of understanding (theory). Our bodies are as important to our work and as deeply enculturated as our languages. In fact, arguments now coming forth about the importance of bodies/senses in scholarship mirror and in many ways replicate those that have long been made about language. We all know that works in translation are not quite the same as works in original languages and that even when we read them in their original languages, works written long ago, or in contexts far removed from those of their readers, are inevitably transformed by our reading. These well-accepted facts about language are limited cases of the larger fact of our situated being which is manifest in our embodied (sensed) experience of the world, including our selves. For it is in and as bodily creatures that we learn first to speak and then to read.

Knowing Bodies – Beginning Steps in Classrooms

My students (and I suspect yours) come to college with some verbal sophistication. They have read and written works in multiple genres; they have composed many essays. They have completed assignments to identify bias and point of view. They have read a little of Chaucer in Old English and a bit more in contemporary translation; they have read a couple of plays by Shakespeare in the original. Though I always wish they knew more and took what they know more seriously, my students are conscious users and consumers of language (Miles 1985, 18–27).

On the other hand, most of my students have little experience thinking about or consciously making material culture. They are also likely to be unfamiliar with the notion

that their bodies are intellectual tools, or that the world of seemingly immediate perception is actually the result of processes that include cultural learning and skill development. They are, however, quite aware of the extent to which their own embodied experience has been shaped by the demands of school. Students know quite a bit about how they have been socialized for academic success, the effects that has had on their bodies, and the ways both are connected to the material conditions of academic work, in classrooms and elsewhere. Although they have not considered that process as creating a disciplined academic body, a scholar's body, it takes little urging to get them to do so. When, for example, I ask students what they learned in first grade, the most common responses are "to sit still and face forward," "to line up according to height," and "to raise my hand when I need to go to the bathroom." Once students begin to understand their own bodies as disciplined knowledge instruments, they can imagine other bodies in other times and places as differently disciplined knowledge instruments that correspond to different knowledge. Once they begin to imagine the effects of material culture on their own experience, they can understand how it affects others as well. They discover both commonality and difference with practitioners of the religions they study in class.

I like to tell students the story of a young Pueblo man I knew years ago. In his culture, time is not a substance that can be saved, lost, or wasted. It is a process of fulfillment in which things, people, situations, and events ripen. Wisdom consists in discerning the ripeness of things, of attending in each moment to what is ripe, not just in itself, but for receiving one's attention as well. This young man simply could not master the academic schedule. It made no sense to him, for example, to stop an engaging and significant discussion with fellow students to go to class just because class was scheduled. For him that was the opposite of wisdom and cut against the grain of everything he had learned in his indigenous education. He failed out of school fairly early in his academic career, though he was quite bright. Many colleagues believed he was lazy, or lacked discipline, or simply did not care. I think there was a significant and in some ways tragic lack of coherence between his embodied, sensed, lived experience of time and that embedded in academic schedules.

After hearing this story, students often share their own struggles to master academic time: the conflict between adolescents' natural nocturnal rhythms and the early morning ritual of high school, for example, which dovetails with the dreaded eight o'clock class and the academy's strange habit of equating contact hours with learning. Almost every

student has a story about mastering material in much less time than devoted to it in class and a counterexample of needing more time than allowed in order to learn.

This leads naturally into discussions of other components of the academic body. Scholars, college students among them, must use specific bodily disciplines to succeed. They must be able to sit for extended periods in sterile rooms buzzing with the sound of fluorescent lights, listening to professors and classmates. They must dissociate from themselves their proprioceptive experiences and kinaesthetic urges. Successful students' bodies have been trained to delay elimination (and even the experience of needing to eliminate), to repress the experience of sexual desire, hunger, and thirst, to still the urge for movement and kinaesthetic expression for a stillness which is required not only for attending (conferences, classes, laboratories) but also for reading, writing, and computer work. We begin disciplining students' bodies when they are very young, and at each stage, success in school is tied closely to mastering physical discipline. As early as primary school students who cannot sit still are medicated, removed to special classrooms, or both (Carp 2001, 99–104).

Academic material culture correlates with the scholar's body. It defines meaning and requires the use of certain perceptual skills at the expense of others. It has religious overtones, as well, since the structure of the lecture hall is derived from and carries significances borrowed from Protestant worship spaces. Its rectangular interiority is rooted in the grid-system of Cartesian space and carries its own semiotics. The uses of the body and bodily space enforced by the academy's seating and traveling patterns signify as well, and are offensive to students from some cultural backgrounds. In one lecture hall in which I work, chairs are bound together by swiveling rods, which force students to sit with their personal spaces interlinked. Too close for comfortable isolation and too distant for intimacy, the students are forced to look away from one another in embarrassed mutual ignorance, pretending they are not there.

Students are often stunned to realize the extent to which they have habituated classrooms. When I draw their attention, for example, to the visible flickering and constant hum created by the fluorescent lights, they are amazed to discover the light is not constant and the sound is omnipresent. Yet in the next moment one will recall an intense awareness of this in early primary school, a recollection seconded by many in the room. When students begin to notice the actual environment of the class, they become aware both of its materiality and of the degree to which they have habituated it. At this point, it is helpful to remind students that formal learning takes place in very

different environments, effected differently by different religious traditions. In a world religions class, one might discuss Islamic *madrasas*. In a class on Christianity one might consider medieval contexts of formal instruction in which, for example, even solitary reading was done out loud and while walking. Students take great delight uncovering academic materiality, both as material culture and as academic body. They enjoy learning about other material conditions of learning and imagining the differences and similarities they might experience had they been raised in those conditions instead.

The study of religion demonstrates that specific disciplines of the body correspond to specific religious experiences and understandings; yogic knowledge, for example, is the result of a long process of bodily training. There are several articles or book chapters that make this point well and are accessible to undergraduate students (e.g., Sullivan 1990; Stoller 1997, 1–44 and 48–73; and Seremetakis 1994, 1–18 and 23–44). For a shorter reading, I use excerpts from Desjarlais's account of his work with a Yolmo shaman in Nepal (1992; 26–27, 29).

Students also bring their own complex cultural experiences to class. Some are not native English speakers; others speak another language well; others have traveled outside the United States, some extensively. It does not take much to get these students to share what this experience has taught them. My students, for example, have said:

“There are some things I can say in (some other language) I simply cannot say in English, and vice versa.” “When I was (in that country), everyone wanted to be close enough to smell me and for me to smell them. If I backed away, they assumed I had a character flaw I was trying to hide.” “Eating (somewhere else) was a totally different experience than I am used to. It took so much time, we all shared the same pots of food on the table. The conversation was so extended and intimate. So much time went into preparing, serving, and cleaning up the meal. It really meant something to them.” “My hosts were always asking me to pay attention to something I could not even notice. It was usually sounds, or scents, but sometimes qualities of movement. It took me a long time to get even a hint of what they were talking about, and I never really did catch on.”

These student experiences open directly onto the importance of enculturated bodies and sensoria in religion. They also point out the obvious and important analogies to what we already know about language. Reading a text in translation is at best an

approximation, which relies on the profundity of the translator's knowledge of the languages and the subject matter. Even for the best translator, some things can be said in one language and not in another; they simply escape translation. Analogously, understandings can be moved from one cultural landscape to another only with deep familiarity with both and, even so, some dimensions of one will remain inexpressible in another.

Despite this, material religion is in some ways more accessible than religious speech and text, since it requires no translation. We can provide students with both mediated and direct experiences of religious materiality which can help them understand specific aspects of a tradition, deepen their understanding of a tradition in general, think about the meaning of the idea of religion, work comparatively, and conceptualize important problematics and opportunities in the study of religion.

Using Visual Resources

One of the easiest ways to engage material religion is through the large number of available slide sets, films, videos, and websites about religion, many of which are designed for classroom use. In them students encounter material religion as movement, color, sound, action, and interaction. Visual media have their limitations, though. We have already noted that the EuroAmerican ecumene is remarkably sight-oriented. Its systems and symbols for formal knowledge are even more so (Howes 1991, 2005). Turning material religion into spectacle is only marginally better than turning it into text. For the participants, neither African ritual, nor Hindu architecture, nor Chinese funeral practices, nor the Hajj are primarily visual, nor, for that matter, are Eucharist, Baptism, or the procession of the Torah Scroll. Any visual presentation should be accompanied by reflection on the full bodily engagement of participants with material religion. Moreover, video and other forms of pictorial representation raise important questions of who is representing whom, and how “holding the camera” affects the truth-value of the depictions.

Trinh T. Minh-Ha's “Film as Translation: A Net with No Fisherman” (1992) is a wonderful exploration of many of these issues that is accessible to students for classroom use. I

like to show Trinh's short film, "Reassemblage" (1982), which runs about forty minutes, when we discuss her article.

Trinh is an artist and filmmaker. Born in Vietnam, she learned English in school and came to the United States in 1970. In "Film as Translation," she meditates on the ambiguities of representation embedded in the filmic conventions of ethnographic and educational films. These conventions, so familiar to us we seldom see them, establish the authority of the filmmaker. They assure audiences of the authenticity of the information provided, the lack of bias of the filmmaker, and the adequacy of the representation provided. Trinh suggests that in film, as in texts, we are better served by revelations of the creator's point of view and biases, and of the limits and conventions of the expressive medium, than by the pretense that the camera is neutral and there is no framing eye (and mind) behind. She insists on the unity of theory and practice; making film is doing theory (Trinh 1992, 122).

"Reassemblage" is a film of primarily women's culture in three adjacent Senegalese societies. Though not focused on religion, it includes religion as it is incorporated in daily life (Trinh 1992, 116). By refusing all common filmic conventions, including auditory ones of music and voice over, "Reassemblage" makes us aware of how those conventions are used and hidden in other films. "There is nothing," she writes, "objective in filmmaking . . . what you often have is a mere abidance by the conventions of documentary practice, which is put forward as the 'objective' way to document other cultures" (Trinh 1992, 119).

Once students have read and watched Trinh, I ask them to identify the conventions used in the films, videos, and slide sets we watch in class. They write response papers in which they incorporate both their understanding of the visual resource in its own terms and of how the conventions used in it affects its meaning. I have found contemporary students to be surprisingly sophisticated about how media are constructed, though they often have not reflected on their awareness. This exercise, sustained throughout a course, produces a growing visual sophistication and a critical visual awareness that complements the critical thinking about written texts most

teachers demand.

Using Museums

Near the end of a semester, I took a large World Religions class to an art museum. With the help of curators, we reviewed the collection, which was organized (much like our textbook) around indigenous cultures and great civilizations. After the tour, each student chose one collection and returned to spend an hour exploring it, finally devoting a concluding hour in close examination of a single artifact. They wrote short papers later on each of the three parts of the assignment.

For the first part, I asked students to pay special attention to similarities and differences between a religious studies approach and a museum approach to the artifacts. Their responses focused on two issues: the extent to which the museum was concerned with formal issues and often ignored or effaced use while religious studies was concerned with meaning and often stressed use; and how the museum environment affected their sensory and semiotic experience, not only by privileging sight, but also by creating a universal acoustic and olfactory space and a uniform quality of lighting. They found this created a kind of equivalence among all the artifacts and that the museum atmosphere dominated the artifacts and their religious traditions. Students described the overall atmosphere of the museum as being “like church” and said it intruded on their ability to imaginatively place the artifacts in the rich sensual environments to which they belonged in practice. On the whole, though, students reported enjoying seeing things “in the flesh,” noting the richness it added to the prints, slides, and films they had previously seen.

While films and other visual resources present material religion in practice while keeping us at a distance from what they represent, museums put us in the presence of actual elements of religious materiality, which have been removed from their indigenous contexts of use. For religious persons, all material religion participates in practice, which engages whole bodies. Reading a sacred text is an embodied practice, as is contemplating a meditation symbol, or reciting a mantra, or wearing an amulet or a

piece of clothing, or praying. Visiting a museum is also a whole body practice, but of a very different sort, as my students experienced. By re-placing religious symbols and artifacts in displays, museums both de-nature and alter them.

This is a special case of the general fact of EuroAmerican knowledge forms, all of which have strong colonial ties. As we noted above, we select our experiences according to our own criteria of importance and bring them into the specialized space of the Academy to be integrated with and both clarified and distorted by pre-existing methods and discourses. Working with museums provides students with a third example of this material process of selection, integration, clarification, and distortion, along with academic material culture and the scholar's body and conventions of documentary and ethnography. Reading sacred texts in class is a fourth example, since for a practitioner reading a sacred text is a devotional act, not a dispassionate academic one; reading the Qur'an dispassionately, or even in translation, is blasphemous.

Lisa Bellan-Boyer's "Temples of Culture: Using Museums for Site Visits" (Fleuckiger 2004, xii–xiii) is a good short resource for thinking through the strengths and weaknesses of museums. As she points out, visiting a museum offers a complex comparative experience. Students encounter symbols and artifacts from several traditions or from several divergent communities or times within a tradition, helping them to "understand that symbols evolve with shifting historical, political, and cultural contexts" (xii). Also, when students encounter a rich array of religious objects and symbols, they are more likely to notice similar items in their everyday worlds, for example, a Nataraj in a restaurant, or a Dia de Los Muertes icon on a grocery store shelf. On the other hand, after I took my students to the museum, I had to remind them frequently that most people don't live with "museum quality" artifacts, and that the religious efficacy of material religion is not determined by connoisseurship.

Discussing museums as institutions before sending students to them helps students understand the decontexting and recontexting effects of museum display. Natural history museums and their cousins the foreign art sections of fine art museums are rooted in EuroAmerican colonialism. Things we liked looking at, or valued, or saw that

they liked looking at or valued were brought back into our environment. There they were exhibited with little understanding of indigenous uses and meanings or of the situations in which they would appear (Barringer and Flyn 1998, Ames 1992, Sandell 2002, Macdonald and Fyfe 1996, Hein 1998, Hooper-Greenhill 2000). While European and American sections of fine art museums have a different history, more closely linked to social class than to colonialism, religious artifacts in these collections are also radically transformed by the museum setting (Paine 2000, Coomaraswamy 1956).

Fortunately, many museum professionals are among the most sensitive scholars exploring the complexities of museum collecting and displaying. These curators and directors of education programs can be invaluable. They have troves of information about the indigenous contexts of artifacts in their collections and about the traditions of creation and use in which they found their local meanings, information usually not included in the exhibits. It works best to contact them before taking a class on the field trip to ask for a special tour, or for a talk before a tour, or a question and answer period after. If students go to the museum independently, curators or educators may be willing for students to e-mail questions after the visit.

Museum professionals often work with living indigenous artists to re-create practices. At one museum I watched (and smelled, heard, and felt) as Tibetan monks created a mandala out of sand, complete with incense, chanting, and other sacred rituals, over several days. Museum staff also may know local artisans of religious material culture and be willing to help students to meet and work with them (see below). As Bellan-Boyer points out, museums are best “when used to expand and augment student experiences with actual worshipping communities” (2004, xii).

Site Visits and Other Experiences

Teachers and students can explore local religious communities to discover not just what practitioners believe, but what they do, and to understand the meanings of those practices. While such site visits are invaluable, like other learning tools they are incomplete and potentially distorting. Students may, for example, be enthralled with the exoticism of an unfamiliar site, or they may take a single location or experience, for

example, of a Zen meditation and dharma talk, as paradigmatic of “the religion.” It does not take a lot of class time, however, to counteract these tendencies. “Teaching with Site Visits” provides ten brief and useful essays that “address the practical nuts-and-bolts of organizing site visits as well as their pedagogical, ethical, and intellectual dimensions” (Fleuckiger 2004, i).

I ask students first to carefully and respectfully attend to their experience at the site, and then to inquire critically and curiously into that experience. I encourage them to reflect on their experience and their inquiry. It helps to remind students to attend to the full range of their bodily experiences on site, for they may remember that ritual engages the whole body but forget that all material culture does, whether it is private, silent, meditative contemplation of sacred text, or ecstatic dancing. Sacred music is not only auditory, but kinaesthetic and, often, olfactory and visual; sacred architecture is kinaesthetic, tactile, auditory, and olfactory, as well as visual; an encounter with a sacred image enlivens the whole body; any of these may be synaesthetic. Students benefit from encouragement to integrate their bodily and material experiences with ongoing analysis and interpretation. They should, for example, compare and contrast their experiences by talking with one another about their different site visits and their differing experiences of a single site and by considering other impressions gained from class readings, media presentations, museum visits, and so forth.

Formal worship services provide a rich context of material culture. Clothing, body positions, ritual specialists, sights, sounds, movement patterns, music, words, and architecture often combine in a multi-sensory experience of religious practice. However, students committed to certain religious traditions may be uncomfortable with or resistant to attending such worship, finding it to be a violation of their own religious commitments.

Nearly every community has less threatening places to experience material religion. Preferably, these will be places where students experience not just objects and images, but the total context of use and practice and where they can discuss with practitioners those uses and practices. For example, in my hometown there is a vibrant Indian immigrant community. A few years ago I taught a small section of a World Civilization

course with a religion focus. The mid-point of the course corresponded roughly with Divali, the Hindu festival of the New Year. I knew the woman who would host the Divali celebration and asked if my class could attend. She agreed. For the convenience of the local community, the event was held on the Saturday nearest Divali and not on the day itself. At six o'clock, my students arrived at the local Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship. Noticing the sacred symbols drawn with colored sidewalk chalk on the pavement at the entrance to the building, they entered.

What followed was both like and unlike the annotated slide set on Divali we had studied the previous week. Images of Ganesha and Lakshmi sat in a brass tray in front of the lectern surrounded by offerings of food (mostly sweets) and flower petals. The walls were covered with brightly colored cloth with unfamiliar images and symbols. Songs in Hindi played from a small tape recorder; some people sang along, or closed their eyes and swayed gently to the music with evident enjoyment. Many of the women and some of the men wore Indian clothing, the women resplendent in saris and adorned with tika on their foreheads. Male and female elders read prayers in Sanskrit and Hindi, many of which were subsequently recited in English. Children read instructional passages about Divali and its primary deities from a book that was passed from child to child; many students chose to read when the book came their way. The woman who organized the puja made remarks (not unlike a sermon) from the lectern. They concerned not only the traditional Divali themes of renewal, reconciliation, and wealth, but also peace, especially between India and Pakistan. She reminded us that wealth is only superficially economic, being more profoundly an inner, spiritual reality. Then her husband lit a swinging brazier of incense and participants, including many of my students, walked to the front and wafted the smoke into their faces and over their hair. Then we shared the sweets from the brass tray as prasad. When we were done, Indian food (mostly unfamiliar to my students) appeared in copious abundance and a feast ensued, again both like and unlike the potluck dinners so familiar to my students. During the meal, students talked with the participants. What did the ritual with the incense mean, why did we bathe ourselves in it, how did that feel to a full participant? What is prasad? How did this compare to Divali in India? What was it like for young Hindus who had never been to India? Later, in class, we discussed our experience and reactions.

While this site visit relied on local immigration and personal connections, every community offers possibilities: Roman Catholics who can demonstrate and discuss the uses of rosaries and of images of the Crucifix, the Virgin, and the saints; a Protestant church musician to discuss and demonstrate hymnody; a Latino community which will share the Dia de los Muertes in all its rich physicality; a coven of Pagans who will demonstrate and discuss the material bases of their religious practices; participants in an African-derived New World Religion (Santería, Candomblé, Voudon) who may allow a class to attend a ceremony.

Artisans who make sacred objects are another resource for teaching and learning about material culture. The process of making religious artifacts is often a significant religious moment in itself, tied to artisans' skilled bodies and their spiritual development. Modern Western artists tend to be concerned with self-expression, pure form, and the history of art; they tend to believe that their individual desires are essential to the work of art, that the artifacts they make are about either the artists or the materials of which they are composed, and that idiosyncrasy or uniqueness are essential to the work. Students tend to share these ideas about "art" and to universalize them to all cultural contexts. Religious artisans, however, are unlikely to share any of these orientations, understanding instead that the process of transforming matter is also a process of transforming self, that the work of art must conform to its spiritual purpose and use, and that the "proof" of the work is its effectiveness in its religious context. Of course, artisans serving different religious communities will differ from one another in important respects, and students will benefit by comparing what they learned from their contacts, be they an icon maker for the Greek Orthodox, a Pagan who makes power objects for a coven, or a home altar artisan from an African tradition. These folks are probably not professional artists, but may make their livings at the most mundane occupations. Students enjoy and benefit from making an artifact following the precepts of the artisans with whom they met and then reflecting on the experience.

Bodily disciplines are also key sites of religious materiality, and many students are already engaged in them. Nearly all martial arts have spiritual dimensions, and many masters teach them as spiritual disciplines: the "ki" of Aikido and the "chi" of Tai Chi Chuan refer to the sacred energy of the cosmos; Capoeira is infused with African New

World spirituality. Often there is someone teaching yoga in a spiritual manner. Elders of local indigenous communities may share elements of their practices. Perhaps there is a kathakali troupe, or a kirtan, or a Noh company.

Sacred music, too, is almost always available. Students can attend events in different traditions where sacred music is used. It helps if they take notes immediately after each event to record their responses. Later I ask them to write a comparison paper or make a class presentation on the music's impacts and effects. Often Western sacred music is performed in a secular context (e.g., a symphony performance of Bach's B-Minor Mass); students can then reflect on the differing effects of performing sacred music in a secular (or profane) context.

Media themselves affect experience and thought (see, e.g., de Vries and Weber 2001). The Protestant and Gutenberg revolutions, for example, are linked. The printing press made mass distribution of vernacular translations of the Bible possible; this, in turn, offered each worshiper private experience of the Divine word. In a more contemporary vein, students enjoy cruising the airwaves and Internet to observe and then consider the new forms of religious media developing in our cultural landscape. In these media, religions take on new material forms, and religious practitioners become skilled at the uses of new materials and media, transforming the religions in the process. Students can look at and listen to religious television and explore religious websites. While classrooms with access to television or web broadcast make it possible to engage these resources in class, students can use them outside of class instead of or in addition to textbooks. Mahlon H. Smith, of Rutgers University's Religion Department, has established the Virtual Religion Index, which provides hyperlinks to important religion-related web pages, including those run by religious institutions (2006). Local religious organizations in most communities have websites that students can explore. An emerging literature discusses the mutual effects of religion and new media on one another (Høsgaard and Warburg 2005, Zaleski 1997, Brasher 2001, Fore 1987, Miles 1996).

Conclusion

Religion is practiced by people. These practices are richly material, the people fully embodied. To understand religion requires a profound and sustained encounter with religious materiality. This fact is reinforced when we consider the role of material culture in forming the processes by which people differentially perceive the world within which religions take place, and the long engagement between material culture and religion, each affecting the other. No presentation of religion is complete or adequate if it does not incorporate material culture.

Investigating religion and material culture, we discover as well the significance of materiality in our investigations. Our perceptual capacities have been shaped, both enabled and limited, in material culture. Within the normative bodily templates of the EuroAmerican ecumene, the Academy further disciplines scholars' bodies. Like all knowledge, academic knowledge correlates with knowing bodies physically trained for specific knowledge tasks. Additionally, both the academic body and other elements of academic material culture bear traces of their religious roots. Simultaneous investigation of religious and academic material culture, including human bodies, provides a complex field of evidence whose exploration is fruitful and necessary to the academic study of religion. Just as we require students to become increasingly sophisticated in their understanding of texts, so we must insist they learn about the material and bodily dimensions of academic knowledge.

Material and bodily investigations of religion constantly remind students and teachers how our own bodies and sensory training are implicated in our ability to know and understand. Experiential exploration of religious materiality makes plain that our bodies, our material culture, and our intellectual and sensory disciplines are epistemological problems for the study of religion.

This understanding must inevitably lead us to reformulate the higher levels of education in the study of religion. While now we insist, quite rightly, that masters and doctoral

students study languages and texts, we will need to move beyond this understanding of religion as textual and linguistic. Scholars of religion should be as deeply contextualized, and as professionally competent, in disciplines of material culture relevant to our studies as we are in disciplines of linguistic culture. We will have to find ways to include within the basic competencies required of every scholar of religion an ability in sculpture, architecture, dance, martial art, music, trance, or another form of material religion. Otherwise, our subject will escape us!

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